

Oral History Interview

with

LLEWELLYN E. THOMPSON

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By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Ambassador, Arthur Schlesinger credits you with the formulation of the idea of the limited test ban. I wonder if you would comment on that.

THOMPSON: I would have to look up my messages from Moscow to see whether in fact I did -- I think I did -- recommend this as a policy. I'm not at all sure that I did. But what I do recall is that shortly before Ambassador [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin returned to the

with me and others Soviet affairs. And he had done a lot of reading and was, I think, quite knowledgeable. I imagine this impressed Khrushchev.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can get into another major thing you were involved in. This has been discussed very thoroughly, or written about very thoroughly, in Elie Abel's book [The Cuban Missile Crisis]. The thing I'm getting to is the Cuban missile crisis. I wonder if you had ever had time to read that book and whether you had any disagreement with any of the particular things you read in that book?

THOMPSON: Yes, I went through it very quickly. I didn't read it very thoroughly. But in general I think it was, as far as it went, a fairly good and balanced account. I talked to him some about it.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I gathered that.

THOMPSON: And others did. Mr. [George W.] Ball and I saw him together several times.

O'CONNOR: I wondered how you happened to be brought into the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, the committee that really handled the Cuban missile crisis.

THOMPSON: Well, I think this was almost entirely due to the President. I had had a long series of briefings for him when he first came into office. I think I spent something like eight hours during my first period of consultation back here -- or a total of eight. And I think at the time of this crisis what the President wanted was people whose views he wanted and not some just formal group on which there were people who theoretically were concerned, but whom he didn't necessarily think would contribute to the discussion.

O'CONNOR: Well, apparently your personal relationship

with the President grew increasingly more close, really, during the Presidency. Is that true?

THOMPSON: Yes. This sometimes had problems because he would quite often ring me up either at home or here and ask my opinion about something which I did not have time to reflect on or to discuss with the Secretary. The Secretary quite understood this. I talked to him several times and asked him if he wanted me to express my views on these things, and he said, "By all means." But it was sort of a heavy responsibility. I mean, the President's mind operated so quickly, and he was impatient with people who were slow. So you had to go into high gear sometimes to think in giving a quick opinion on something. But Kennedy was a great pleasure to work with.

O'CONNOR: Elie Abel comments on the difference between the way the Executive Committee functioned

with John F. Kennedy present and the way it functioned with John F. Kennedy absent. I wonder if you would care to comment on that. Do you feel there was a difference?

THOMPSON: Well, obviously, if you're kicking around a problem without the President there, you can express yourself more freely. I think everyone on the committee was very conscious of the heavy responsibility the President had and, therefore, thought very carefully about what they said. Whereas, when you're discussing it just in a group, you can sound off without the same feeling of responsibility just to explore the question. There was a great deal of discussion simply to try to illustrate all aspects and facets of the problem. And [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy particularly used this technique of sometimes being the devil's advocate just to try to bring out what all the facts were. One

thing I'm not sure I put in my previous statement which impressed me very much was that the President was out of the room one day, and we were discussing a paper three or four pages long. And after about a half hour's discussion or more, we arrived at a certain consensus about it. The President came back in the room and glanced at this and turned the pages so fast that it seemed difficult that he could actually be reading it and then said, "Well, gentlemen, I think so and so," and came out with exactly the same conclusion we'd reached after a half hour's intense discussion.

O'CONNOR: That would be pretty impressive. Did he make a particular effort to get everybody's opinion? Can you comment on that? Yours in particular I'm concerned with -- your opinion in particular.

THOMPSON: Oh yes, he would very often call on people

by name and ask what they thought about a given thing. I remember he once asked me what would the Soviets do if we instituted a blockade. I recall replying that they would probably send one ship through to test us out, which is, of course, exactly what they did.

O'CONNOR: There were reports also, and Elie Abel mentions this, that Robert F. Kennedy irritated some people in these meetings, offended others. And I wondered if you had any comments on that; whether he ever offended you, or whether you could understand how some other people might have been offended?

THOMPSON: Well, he certainly never offended me. I think he performed a great service, as I said, in deliberately bringing out all of the bugs in a given course of action and making sure that every possibility was looked at. But no, I think this was a remarkable

thing in which the people who had formed strong opinions nevertheless wanted to be sure that facts contrary to their opinions had been understood. I thought this was very commendable.

O'CONNOR: Do you know of anyone in particular in that committee that you would say exerted the most influence or the greatest influence on the President?

THOMPSON: I have no way of judging that. Of course, Bobby Kennedy was very close to him and I suppose was the most important . . .

O'CONNOR: I wondered if anyone particularly dominated the sessions more frequently than others.

THOMPSON: Very hard to say.

O'CONNOR: Would you comment on the value of the information that had been acquired through [Colonel Oleg] Penkovsky on making a decision regarding the Cuban missile crisis? Did this play an important role or not?

THOMPSON: I don't think that it had very much importance.

O'CONNOR: I've heard several people comment that this was crucial in enabling us to make the decision; that it was extraordinary that we were able to make the decision with the satellite reconnaissance, not necessarily satellite reconnaissance, but the intelligence from various sources that we did have, Penkovsky being one of the major sources.

THOMPSON: I don't myself think this played a very great role; it may have in affecting some people. I think at that time there wasn't enough known about his reliability.

O'CONNOR: Well, a few other things, and we can wind this up. Sources have credited you -- Elie Abel being one and somebody else, Schlesinger, probably, and Sorensen -- with pointing out the need for the OAS [Organization of American States] approval and maintained that you said this would appear

very important in the eyes of the Soviets.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's true.

O'CONNOR: Can you add anything to that, or do you have any comments about that?

THOMPSON: I've always been struck by how much importance the Soviets do attach to at least some cover of legality to things that they do. And I think, obviously, they always have tried to manipulate them and exploit public opinion. And I think the fact that this had endorsement of the Latin American countries put an entirely different problem for them. I wouldn't doubt it. If they could isolate the United States and mobilize world opinion against us, why, this would have been very important and, therefore, would have affected their judgment about what they could and couldn't do. I think another very important thing in the whole Cuban crisis, which... .

I suppose, certainly in the sense of being opposed to a sudden air strike against these missiles, that I was a dove, but I also felt that it was very important that we be cranked up for an invasion. And this was certainly known to the Soviets that we were. I think it was the combination of the two -- our restraint, on the one hand, by using the blockade rather than actual attack combined with the fact that we were ready if need be was the key combination.

O'CONNOR: This idea of readiness in the Cuban missile crisis reminds me of another instance where people have said that our readiness played a very important role and that was in the crisis in Laos in 1961. Our troops were put into Thailand. No one really wanted those troops to move from Thailand into Laos. It was hoped that the threat

of the troops there would play an important role. Do you have any comments to make on that? You were in the Soviet Union at that time.

THOMPSON: Yes, and that's the reason I don't really have much to say about it.

O'CONNOR: I thought maybe you would know whether or not this played an important role as far as Khrushchev was concerned.

THOMPSON: No, I had no way there of judging that except general knowledge.

O'CONNOR: Okay, one other question about the Cuban missile crisis. This deals with Khrushchev's -- I believe it was his second -- letter, written during that period that's reported as showing signs of real fright under the strain of this crisis. Historians can make up their own minds in the future as to whether or not the language of this letter, if it ever is published, does indicate this,

but I wanted your opinion because I thought perhaps you had seen it.

THOMPSON: Yes. I think this probably was something that Khrushchev, under strain, had dictated and written. It certainly sounded -- it had all the earmarks of his doing it personally. We know that Khrushchev normally did not himself dictate his messages. He would talk in front of his colleagues, and then someone would write up his ideas. And then he would make changes or okay it. But this had all the earmarks of having been directly dictated by him -- and probably under circumstances in which no one was able to change it or polish it or modify it. I think that he obviously was, and should have been, very much worried and probably had been under considerable strain.

O'CONNOR: Another couple of questions here. In 1963 a matter that you were involved in was,